New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1948

Volume IX, Number 7 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of March 8, 1948

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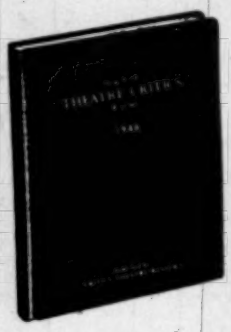

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"The Hallams"

The Sun

March 5, 1948

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

'The Hallams' Slack and Sprawling.

Rose Franken, author of "Claudia" and "Another Language," makes further scrutiny of a fiercely possessive family in "The Hallams," presented last evening at the Booth. Put this one down as a loose-jointed and uneven play in which Miss Franken makes effective use of a mass of rich, human, detailed material.

"The Hallams," dawdling over character bits and pausing to give home-life touches, comes through as a play of little substance. Its people are a generally cheerless lot, a group with many woes, and Miss Franken records their history dutifully.

She concerns herself with marriage, sickness and death in a second consideration of the family that was first brought forth in "Another Language." An outsider in conflict with the clannish group is presented when a spirited girl, with a career of her own, marries into the family, becoming the bride of the tubercular Jerry Hallam. It's the girl's desire to live with her invalid husband in her own apartment and she brings to him a genuine but brief happiness. When he becomes acutely ill the family insists upon his being removed to their big house. His condition gets worse, he is taken to a hospital, and dies shortly afterward.

"The Hallams," as was the case with "Claudia," is inconclusive at the final curtain, and that's the way Miss Franken wanted it. Perhaps there will be a play or two more from her favorite family group. In the writing of this new play she again reveals herself as a dramatist who is interested in the little things, who has a feeling for character, and as a director who has undoubtedly worked tirelessly to get just the right inflections, readings and gestures. Her people seem very real, and also very tiresome from time to time.

"The Hallams" is played—adroitly underplayed—by a cast that follows the author's careful direction. Katharine Bard has warmth and charm as the young wife who has become the bride of a dying man. Dean Norton turns in a skillful, restrained performance as the doomed bridegroom. Mildred Wall, back on Broadway after far too long an absence, brings life to her scenes as the sharp-tongued Helen, whose own husband is suffering with an incurable illness. Alan Baxter is excellent as the rebellious Victor Hallam, the youngest and most independent-minded of the lot. There are good performances from Matt Briggs, Mildred Dunnock, Royal Beal and June Walker.

And a fine one from Ethel Griffies, who dominates the clan, and occasionally the play, as the matriarch—the withering, demanding, fretting, exacting Grandma Hallam who, in the words of a daughter-in-law, will live to bury them all.

"The Hallams" is a slack and sprawling play, and it leaves you with the impression of being a piece written by a dramatist who was more interested in her character drawing than she was in her play as a whole.

'THE HALLAMS.'

Play by Rose Franken; settings by Raymond Sovey; staged by Miss Franken; costumes by Bianca Stroock; production associate, Richard E. French presented by William Brown Meloney at the Booth Theater Thursday evening, March 4, 1948. The cast:

Mrs. Hallam	Ethel Griffies
Etta Hallam	Mildred Dunnock
Paul Hallam	Royal Beal
Grace Hallam	June Walker
Helen Hallam	Mildred Wall
Victor Hallam	Alan Baxter
Walter Hallam	Matt Briggs
Harry Hallam	Frank M. Thomas
Mr. Hallam	John McKee
Jerry Hallam	Dean Norton
Kendrick Hallam	Katharine Bard

SYNOPSIS—Act I. Scene: The dining room of the Hallam residence in the East Seventies, Manhattan. Time: An evening in spring. Act II. Scene: Jerry and Kendrick's apartment. Time: Two weeks later. Act III. Scene: The same as Act I. Time: The following afternoon.

Journal American

March 5, 1948

New Franken Play Warm and Human

By ROBERT GARLAND

In Rose Franken's new play which, after sixteen years, brings her homogeneous Hallams back to the Booth from which they started in 1932, the playwright respects her people on the stage as well as her people in the auditorium.

Miss Franken isn't one to push her people around to create a laugh, a tear or a situation. Especially if her person is a Hallam. And there're eleven Hallams in the new play which bears the familiar family name hard by the Shubert Alley.

No sequel to "Another Language," but "a progression in the lives of the same people," "The Hallams" returns all but one of the eleven original homogeneous New Yorkers. There's a new and not-so-homogeneous Hallam to make up for the loss of Stella.

These mid-Manhattanites are again woven into a narrative in which the greatness and the smallness of the so-called human race prevail hand in hand and side by side. Creating them in their own image, Miss Franken lets them pretty much alone.

Which is why, on 45th Street, "The Hallams" is a human, humorous and understanding comedy. When up to the hilt in Hallams, Miss Franken is at her happiest as a playwright. And I, as a playgoer and non-family man, am at my happiest as well.

• • •

Testy Events

With no family to care where I go, what I do, or with whom I go and do it, I'd like to believe I can sit back at the Booth and observe the testy comings and goings of the Hallams with godlike impersonal condescension.

What a kiddie-like clan they are, these connatural mid-Manhattanites. Especially the males, their mother's sons, every silver-corded one of them. The grandson, too, unable to break away from his grandmother's proud possessiveness. Yet—

Yet I, as well as you, am moved and fascinated by Mother Hallam's embittered matriarchy. And the futile father, an ancient visitor in his own house. And the middle-aged, mother-ridden "boys." And their wise and wishful wives!

These wives are, after their several fashions, the mainstays of Miss Franken's comedy. Hallams, yet not quite Hallams, they're more to be laughed at, more to be pitied than their men. These, Rose Franken has drawn with a knowing, almost wicked hand.

But it's Jerry Hallam who, in "Another Language," became involved with the missing Stella, and his bride, Kendrick, who carry such love interest as "The Hallams" provides. Superimposed upon the family, they're fresh and firm.

• • •

Flawlessly Acted

This comedy of character, this tragedy of small things made large and large things made small, this human, humorous, understanding, play of which the family's the core, is flawlessly acted by everyone on-stage. By every one!

Directed by the author so that no direction shows, the homogeneous Hallams come, go and come again as if the stage were actually the family dining-room or Kendrick's terrace apartment overlooking the 59th st. bridge. They really belong!

Ethel Griffies as Mother Hallam, Mildred Dunnock as Etta, June Walker as Grace, Mildred Wall as Helen and Katharine Bard as Jerry's girl scout of a wife are too real to be always comforting. Especially Miss Wall.

A young lady to keep your eye on is Katharine Bard. If she doesn't pass out to Hollywood, she's apt to go places theatrically worthwhile. The men are as they should be, from the old Mr. Hallam of John McKee to the young Mr. Hallam of Dean Norton . . .

Maybe I'm missing something good and special by not having a Hallam family of my own. I wouldn't know! But I do know that, in "The Hallams," Rose Franken has written and staged an honest, sad but frequently funny play.

New York Post

March 5, 1948

'The Hallams' Expert Family Chronicle

By RICHARD WATTS JR.

Within the fairly modest limits which she has set for herself, Rose Franken is an authentic creative artist of the theatre. Her latest work, "The Hallams," which opened at the Booth last night, is not a drama of impressive scope or stature, but it is a striking example of the effectiveness that can result when a genuine craftsman manages to capture just the effects she has set out to achieve. In a word or two, Miss Franken knows her business, and the pleasant upshot of her knowledge is that "The Hallams" turns out to be a quiet, modest and almost steadily absorbing family chronicle, written, staged and acted with honesty and credibility.

There are times in the early sections of the play when the author's passion for details seems on the verge of becoming oppressive. It is, however, one of the signs of Miss Franken's steady hand as both playwright and stage director that she risks the first-act peril of dullness in the knowledge that the steady accumulation of seemingly undramatic realistic incident will eventually not only create the impression of believable everyday life but capture the stuff of very human drama. First you get to know and believe in the clannish Hallam family, even though you are likely to find them perhaps a trifle dull. Then, as is the playwright's plan, you become really concerned with their history.

The Matriarch

Although the new play is by no means a sequel to Miss Franken's successful "Another Language" of many seasons ago, these Hallams are the same family whose earlier chronicles were therein recorded. For the purposes of the present work, it is not necessary to know anything more about them than is set down in it. It is enough to note that they are, as I have said, clannish, that they are dominated by an aggressive matriarch and that their wives are subjected to quite a bit of bullying from this old Mrs. Hallam. The play is concerned with what happens when the invalid grandson of the matriarch comes back from Saranac with a pretty and independent young wife.

Although "The Hallams" deals with one death and closes with the likelihood of another, it is not a dour play and not a great deal happens in it. But in the process the characters of the matriarch and her tolerant husband and the children and their wives are studied with detailed and rather loving care, and their joys and sorrows are made both real and interesting. Certainly nothing exciting occurs, but it is somehow strangely poignant in its quiet and unhurried fashion.

Good Cast

As is the way with Miss Franken's works, it is admirably cast and acted. Ethel Griffies, who was so wonderful as the old mother in "The Druid Circle," is impressive as the matriarch, and John McKee is properly sympathetic as her long-suffering husband. The most caustic of the Hallam wives is delightfully played by Mildred Wall, an excellent actress, and Katharine Bard is honest and charming as the independent bride. The other Hallams or their wives are perfectly portrayed by June Walker, Mildred Dunnock, Frank M. Thomas, Royal Beal, Alan Baxter, Matt Briggs and Dean Norton.

I find it a little difficult to explain just why the quiet adventures of so commonplace a family as the Hallams should seem as touching as they do. Nothing takes place that is dramatically striking or original or powerful. You are unlikely to find yourself especially filled with affection for or approval or disapproval of this slightly stuffy clan. And so much detail might well have made for tediousness. The only explanation is that Miss Franken is so skillful a craftsman and has such a sense of human warmth that she can make unpromising material moving. Truly she has the creative touch.

PM Exclusive

March 7, 1948

Kronenberger

The Hallam Family Is No Great Treat

The trouble with a lot of writers is that they write about people. If they wrote, say, about camels, and faithfully recorded the surface qualities we know to be true about camels, doubtless we'd take their word for all the rest and acclaim them masters of camel psychology. Unhappily when they write about people, their faithful handling of surface traits can't hide the fact that the moment they go below the surface they are shockingly unsound. For we happen to know something about people: not so much as we should, but more at least than such writers would seem to. Yet the writers have no alternative; it's people or perish. For who gives a damn about camels?

• • •

Rose Franken is one of the writers who can faithfully record surface characteristics and social detail. It's her forte; one is tempted to say it's her one valid credential. Certain middle-class milieus and types; the family as a middle-class institution; the female—not least the female with claws—as a middle-class product; all the lore of dress and decoration, all the language of cookery: this is Miss Franken's field. Though a limited, it is by no means an unfertile field. Used right, it can create a vivid picture and leave a sharp impression; possess meaning, constitute criticism. But to be used right, it must acquiesce in its having limits—no real third dimension, no real depth. The only way, in a sense, for it to avoid being superficial is to insist upon being. It can never be more than it is, but it can suggest a great deal more. And to be used right, it must also convey a point of view; we must know exactly where the author stands in relation to it.

• • •

Well, in *The Hallams* it's not used right; it's not even used very entertainingly. In *The Hallams*, Mrs. Franken has carried on the family story begun 15 years ago in *Another Language*. She is telling of old lady Hallam' efforts to dominate and consolidate and sequestrate her tribe; of the varying fortunes and differing responses and sometimes quite personal distresses of the middle-aged sons and daughters-in-law; and of a tuberculous young grandson's short, happy, unwise marriage, and death. Mrs. Franken is writing sometimes of relatives, but at other times of that trickier subject, people; she is writing of cold lobster and the help problem, but also of love and death. She is fairly shrewd about relatives, and quite unexceptionable about lobsters; but she is exceedingly unsatisfactory about people or love or death. Each time she abandons flat surfaces and tries to make her world three-dimensional, she makes it hollow; each time she exchanges photography for painting, she leaves a smear; each time she goes in for emotion, she comes out with false sentiment or pretty words.

• • •

As for our knowing where Miss Franken stands in relation to her material, the trouble is she stands everywhere. No doubt she is in a sense attacking middle-class family life; no doubt she is in a sense portraying, even in a sense explaining it. But most of all, and most ruinously, she is exploiting it; making a commodity of it; adding tosh to make the truth more palatable, adding truth to make the tosh more presentable; and too often thinking of her audience's reaction instead of her characters'. But sometimes a watched audience also won't boil; and I fear that the audience reaction to *The Hallams* is pretty cool.

Mrs. Franken's staging is not noteworthy, either, though there are some nice performances. Ethel Griffies is enormously helpful as the indomitable old lady, and Mildred Wall very good in the lively part of a sharp-tongued daughter-in-law. In less lively parts such veterans as Mildred Dunnock, Royal Beal, June Walker, Frank M. Thomas, Alan Baxter and Matt Briggs are as pleasant as circumstances allow.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

March 5, 1948

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Pity the Poor Actors

ROSE FRANKEN has assembled a particularly unpleasant family in her new play, "The Hallams." The characters whom you will find prowling around the stage of the Booth Theater have more than a touch of tuberculosis, a vast regard for the American matriarchy and a hint of anti-Semitism. Since they are portrayed by a company of goodly players, from Ethel Griffies to Katharine Bard, the celebrated author-director has had a chance to build up moments of humor, indignation and pathos. In no way do these compensate for the tedious stretches of an ill-conceived and random dramatic commentary.

* * *

Whatever mea ning Miss Franken thought she was distilling in her celebration of three generations of New Yorkers hovering around a house in the East Seventies like a lot of moths, has gone a glimmering in the script. At one moment she is championing revolt from the rigid conventions set up by a domineering old woman, who believes that the Hallams stand close to God. At another she is intent upon explaining the difficulty of readaptation to normal living on the part of a hopeless consumptive. Maybe she knew people like the Hallams and set them down in theatrical terms with complete authenticity. It doesn't make for good theater.

* * *

If you can bear with a more extended synopsis of the plot, be informed that "The Hallams" centers chiefly around the death of a grandson, which has been clearly foreseen by his wife of a few weeks. The youngsters get caught in the toils of family celebrations and general suspicion.

There is a second-generation character who goes off to Chicago, of all places, to die, a nice grandpa and a ghost called Sylvia, who providentially never comes on stage. There is plenty of bickering in the course of the exposition, including the varied reaction to the fact that a Hallam marries a Jewish doctor. There is too much bickering; too little dramatic illumination.

* * *

Most of the show's small interest comes from the staunch acting. Miss Griffies is an excellent performer, but it is not until late in the play that she gives it some real emotional impetus. Miss Bard does a more successful job of picking up loose ends in a fragmentary production, as the wife of the dying Hallam, and Mildred Wall is altogether splendid as a rebellious in-law. Then there are Royal Beal, June Walker, Alan Baxter, Matt Briggs, Frank M. Thomas, John McKee, Mildred Dunnock and Dean Norton to give specious scenes a bit of feeling. It is a superfine cast that you will find in "The Hallams." It has nice Raymond Sovey backgrounds to frame its involved antics. The latter make one remember "East Lynne" with relish.

Daily Mirror

March 5, 1948

'The Hallams' Are Back in a Sequel

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Rose Franken has a fine flair for making stage characters talk like real people and she always sets her sights high. These admirable Franken qualities are sometimes in evidence in "The Hallams," which her husband, William Brown Meloney, brought to the Booth Theatre last evening.

Miss Franken is interested again in the Hallam family dominated by a matriarch, which first appeared in "Another Language" Mother Hallam thinks she knows what's best for her family, but she makes a couple of tragic mistakes. It's one thing to demand that her sons and their wives put in appearances at her dinners, but it's another to tamper with the happiness of young people.

Mother Hallam is shocked when her grandson returns from a tuberculosis sanitarium in Saranac with a bride.

When the young husband has a hemorrhage at a birthday party, which his wife tried to avoid, Mother Hallam persuades him to come back home, though the wife, a former tubercular case herself, realizes it not the right thing for him. Mrs. Hallam's grandson is rushed to a hospital shortly thereafter and dies.

Mother Hallam gets another shock when a granddaughter elopes with a gifted young doctor of the Jewish faith. It doesn't matter to her that the new grandson-in-law has a good practice, is a good citizen and should make a good husband.

And she's heading for other shocks as the curtain falls. Son Harry has been told he's going to die by his physician and son Victor has decided to wed his late nephew's widow. But she's cut from a granite block and seems capable of surviving all that comes her stubborn way.

Now there ought to be an absorbing comedy or drama in all the above, but Miss Franken has not been able to fashion her materials into better than an intermittently interesting script. She introduces too many characters and too much action and then hasn't time left to develop them properly. The broad outlines are there, but the all-important details are missing for a successful play.

The direction by Miss Franken is not off her top shelf. She sets a slow pace and loses her dominant characters in continuous ensembles. It's like starring Katharine Cornell in a show and then losing her among the supers.

The New York Times

March 5, 1948

In 'The Hallams' Rose Franken Restores to the Booth the Characters of 'Another Language'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Seventeen years have not improved the minds or toned the systems of the Hallams. When Rose Franken first wrote about them in "Another Language" in 1931, they fascinated theatregoers, who saw in them the morose images of family life. Miss Franken came back to them last evening in another family saga impulsively labeled "The Hallams" and put on at the Booth, where "Another Language" first opened its eyes. The Hallams overwhelm "The Hallams." They are stuffy people.

In her chronicle of their stuffiness Miss Franken has meticulously refrained from writing brilliantly and from contributing comment or a point of view that might give their stuffiness perspective. No doubt all our families resemble the Hallams, but at least we do not put them on the stage. In a vindictive world, we can claim that much virtue.

* * *

Since Ethel Griffies plays the matriarch, the Hallams are led by a sharp-tongued, domineering woman who has a fine acid spirit. From the throne-room of her large house in the East Seventies Mother Hallam directs her four sons and their families with benevolent ferocity. To hold the piece together, Miss Franken has invented a story about the rash marriage of a grandson who has tuberculosis. This whimsical idea equips the play with quite a case history of the disease, considerable useful talk about the proper treatment of the patient and some tight-lipped nobility by his young wife. In spite of Miss Franken's careful treatment, the patient dies in the last act. In this respect "The Hallams" improves your mind, but you do not accomplish anything conclusive.

Apparently Miss Franken is writing on the theory that the gruesome spectacle of family gatherings is in itself amusing. For she portrays her sons and daughters-in-law with mournful verisimilitude and reports their small-talk with pitiless accuracy. No wonder all the Hallams are bored with each other, come late, go early and needle each other automatically. For they are settled people of middle-age who have never been anywhere and are certainly not going anywhere now. Miss Franken's insistence on their essential dullness hangs a very grim millstone around the long neck of her play.

* * *

Serving as her own director, she has not helped her actors much. The performance is heavy and awkward. Fumbling around the scenery, some of the actors sometimes look embarrassed, as though they had strayed on to the wrong stage. Miss Griffies is extraordinarily good as Mother Hallam, capable of giving all her scenes a kind of biting, crotchety authority. As a casually wardonic daughter-in-law, Mildred Wall is immensely stimulating; and June Walker

gives an admirably-rounded portrait of a puffy, querulous Hallam wife. Mildred Dunnock does the best she can with the sketchily-written part of a nervous wreck. Katharine Bard has more than she can do to make the part of new daughter-in-law look like anything but a maudlin dream. The cast includes Matt Briggs, Royal Beal and Frank M. Thomas, who never give bad performances; and Alan Baxter and Dean Norton, who do something satisfactory with two very flimsy roles.

Raymond Sovey has designed two handsome interiors in contrasting styles. In designing the costumes, Bianca Stroock has departed from Broadway fashion by actually suiting them to the characters and the play. But nothing anyone can do can save "The Hallams" from dullness. The Hallam family has seen to that.

DAILY NEWS

March 5, 1948

Family Life Gets a Little Soapy In Rose Franken's 'The Hallams'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Although it has bits of humor stemming from intimate observation of the human tribe, Rose Franken's "The Hallams" is, on the whole, a lugubrious affair about a family which is dominated by a rather unpleasant old lady.

It is the same family—a bit older now—with which Mrs. Franken dealt in her successful comedy, "Another Language," in 1932. The same family, in the same theatre; but last evening at the Booth the Hallams seemed less absorbing than they used to be. I prefer the Goldbergs of "Me and Molly."

Since "The Hallams" often sounds like a sheaf of radio serial scripts, I might as well bring you up to date and tell what happened in the previous chapter. In "Another Language" one of Mrs. Hallam's grandchildren, a youth named Jerry, fell in love with an aunt-in-law named Stella. It looked like puppy love to the rest of the family, who were amused.

Now Stella has gone somewhere else—danged if I can remember, where, exactly—and Jerry has grown up, has contracted tuberculosis, has spent eight months at Saranac and, as we begin this new chapter, has brought home a bride. One more Hallam for Mother Hallam to put under her thumb—only this girl won't stay put.

Helen Funny Again.

Before the installment ends Jerry dies, one of Mrs. H.'s sons is given his death warrant by a doctor and accepts it bravely, and the family is getting a little tired of being bullied by the old lady—for which one cannot blame them.

As was the case in "Another Language," most of the humor comes from a dry and forthright daughter-in-law, Helen. In 1932 Margaret Hamilton made quite a hit in this role, and so did Mildred Wall last evening.

Mrs. Franken carefully examines the characters and troubles of this New York tribe. One husband and wife are upset because their daughter marries a Jewish doctor. Jerry's mother is baffled and beaten because her religion, which offers the curative powers of faith, fails to save her boy. Another of Mrs. Hallam's grandsons seems to be in love with a boat. The old lady's venerable husband has some heart trouble . . . and so on.

Cast All New.

Intimate and well-spoken stuff, all of it—but I found I wasn't very interested, except when Jerry's wife was speaking. Being the newest member of the family, she hadn't had time to get as dull as some of the others.

They're the same characters, but it's a new cast. Ethel Griffies baffled as the one with the religion, June Walker is amusing as another Hallam wife whenever she has a chance, and Katharine Bard plays the bride attractively.

Among the men one finds Royal Beal, Alan Baxter, Matt Briggs and others, and Dean Norton plays the stricken Jerry. Mrs. Franken has directed her players, making them quite natural and lifelike. One of Raymond Sovey's sets looks like the same old house in the East 70s, and the other one is a handsome one-room apartment.

Oh, yes — the bride works on radio programs. Just the right training.

New York World-Telegram

March 5, 1948

Franken Play a Meal Without Salt

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Some 16 years ago Rose Franken turned out a memorable account of a silver cord woven into a network around a large family in "Another Language". Now in "The Hallams" she picks up the same group to see how things are getting on with them approximately a decade later.

They have grown older standing still. It is like drawing mustaches and whitening the hair on figures in an old photo album.

The domineering mother and the suffocating family idea were a terrible drug to youth. The tenacles stretched out to crush any breath of independence out of any imaginative person who joined the family.

No Passion Left.

Now that this soporific has been accepted through the years, there is no passion left. Even the youthful rebel Jerry is using on his new wife Ken, the arguments that his uncle Vic once employed to break his wife's heart.

The kernel of this play is Ken's unsuccessful push against the family circle. The Hallams' oppressive concern actually causes Jerry's death from tuberculosis, when they drive him into a nervous display of spirits that is too much for him.

This is somehow no great tragedy. The family smugly transfers its guilt to Ken. Fond as she was of Jerry, she married him in a Florence Nightingale mood, loving someone else, and knowing that he would always love his Uncle Vic's wife, now dead.

It is like a tired echo of an old refrain that comes to life only in fleeting moments.

A Meal Without Salt.

The play is spread so thinly and evenly over so many characters that none of them comes dramatically to life. Despite this, there is a tantalizing reality about all of them, which, because it gives you not enough about anyone, seems to give too much.

It is generally well acted, but leaves an impression that the players are saying this is what they would do with these parts if they really were parts. Unquestionably "The Hallams" progresses with the frustrating incompleteness and overlapping of real life. On the stage it is a meal without salt.

Mother is autocratic and sharp, and Father is understanding because he is too old to care what she may say, Paul is broke and living at home, while his wife Etta is finding out the hard way that Dr. Coue is not enough. Rich Walter and silly Grace are concerned because their daughter wants to marry a Jewish boy.

Harry is fatally but silently ill and his brusque Helen wants nothing, really, but to be with him. Vic has rebelled and rarely even visits. Young Jerry is dragged back to die, and perhaps leave his wife to Vic.

This is a play of undertones and overtones that suggest a much richer fabric than appears on the surface. The sons have lost identity and the wives have become pure types. The total picture is depressing beyond words.

Of the cast, the three daughters-in-law have the chance to be the most interesting. Mildred Wall is bluff and frank as the caustic, good humored Helen. Mildred Dunnock has moving flashes as the dried up Etta. And June Walker gives a performance of remarkable nuance and taste as the witless Grace

"The Linden Tree"

DAILY NEWS

March 3, 1948

Professor B. Karloff Ponders the Future In 'The Linden Tree'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "The Linden Tree," which Maurice Evans presented last evening at the Music Box, J. B. Priestley takes a look at Britain—and possibly the Western World. It is a long look, and a careful one, and the conclusion drawn from it is that, if there is hope for the future, the making of the future lies wtih the old, who have become wise and gentle, and with the young, who have spirit. Mr. Priestley's Professor Linden observes that there is too much dead wood in the middle.

In an interview recently Hilton Edwards, one of the directors of the Dublin Gate Theatre, made the observation that New York audiences are more impatient than those of his home city. It may be that they also are more impatient than those of London, where "The Linden Tree" is having a long run. If so—and I'm afraid it's so—they will discover that the second Priestley play this season is more quiet and undramatic than was the first, which was the pleasantly and ingeniously plotted but not too successful "An Inspector Calls."

Comical O'Connor.

Often I find myself yielding to a weakness for listening—so, last evening, I became quite absorbed in Professor Linden, his wife, his children and his struggle, at the age of 65, to keep a hand in the doings of the world. Apart from this absorption in Mr. Priestley's ruminations, I enjoyed an excellent performance by Boris Karloff in the role of the Professor and a very comical one by Una O'Connor as a strong-minded servant.

Mr. Priestley represents his Britain as the study room of a history prof in a provincial college. It—the study, the college or Britain—is shabby, short of most things and short, even, on hope.

In the study on the professor's 65th birthday gathers his family—ostensibly to celebrate, but really to make him retire. A son has become quite wealthy in sharp, smart trading on the money market; he believes the world has gone to pot and he is going to enjoy himself while he may. One daughter, who has married a Frenchman and lives in a chateau, has become a Catholic and finds in her religion the perfect refuge.

Another daughter, a successful surgeon, has come to believe that science must hold the answer to everything. Only the youngest daughter, who is still in school, finds excitement in life.

Able Mr. Karloff.

The professor declines to retire, even when the university demands his resignation; even when his wife, loving though she is, leaves his dreary college and announces she will not return. All these people, says he, are running away from life. He prefers to face it—to work as long as there is work to do, no matter what the discouragements. This is the hope of our kind of world—and with him is his last-born child, who still is young in spirit.

Mr. Karloff, who is an able player, portrays Mr. Priestley's spokesman with inner conviction and outer charm, and there are other nice family portraits by Barbara Everest, Halliwell Hobbes Jr., Viola Keats, Cathleen Cordell and Marilyn Erskine. Emmett Rogers and Mary Kimber are amusing as a pair of not-too-bright students, and Miss O'Connor is a dandy scene stealer.

'THE LINDEN TREE.'

Play by J. B. Priestley; staged by George Schaefer; settings by Peter Wolf; costumes by Frank Thompson; production supervised by Maurice Evans; presented by Maurice Evans Productions, Inc., at the Music Box Tuesday evening, March 2, 1948. The cast:

Mrs. Cotton	Una O'Connor
Alfred Lockhart	Noel Leslie
Mrs. Linden	Barbara Everest
Rex Linden	Halliwell Hobbes Jr.
Jean Linden	Viola Keats
Marion Linden	Cathleen Cordell
Edith Westmore	Mary Kimber
Dinah Linden	Marilyn Erskine
Professor Linden	Boris Karloff
Bernard Pawcett	Emmett Rogers

SYNOPSIS: The action takes place in Professor Linden's study in the provincial city of Bormanley in Northern England. Early spring, at the present time. Act I. Friday—Scene 1. Late afternoon. Scene 2. Two hours later. Act II. Saturday—Scene 1. Afternoon. Scene 2. Night, several hours later.

New York World-Telegram

March 3, 1948

'Linden Tree' Lacking in Drama

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

If there is hope and sanity in a country living by denial as England now is, they rest in the hearts of the young and the old, according to "The Linden Tree."

The people of middle ages are confused, believe "only muga work," and look only for selfish advancement. This is none too happy a comment, but the method of J. B. Priestley's telling it is hardly any happier.

What he has written comes closer to being a brief editorial in a popular women's magazine, than even a short story. To extend his slender treatise into a full-length play, he has spun endless words around a static situation which has no dramatic excitement.

A college professor who has reached the age of retirement is urged by his family to live in comfort away from his gloomy academic surroundings. This administration of the university dislikes the clinkers he throws in the new machine made education, and is as anxious as his relatives to have him move out.

Healthy Enough Idea.

He resists them all. Even on an emeritus basis, with most of his work taken away, he will try to inform at least the more intelligent students whom he can corral, of the living wonders of history.

He sees that the time of want and unrest, the time of a peaceful revolution, demands the fulfillment of duties. It is not a time for defeatism, or a quick grab at superficial happiness.

Certainly this is a healthy enough idea, and perhaps Mr. Priestley is not entirely to be blamed for the lugubrious tenuousness of this production.

For the most part it is performed as if it were the first reading of a script, when none of the actors have any notion of what the author is getting at. They rattle off lines with no suggestion of comprehension. The result is that if the speeches have any profound thought behind them, it is not conveyed to the audience.

They argue about science and religion in terms that would be scoffed at in a high school bull session.

Like Psychotic Children.

The relationships between the members of the family are no more defined than they would be if they had passed each other in a railroad station, and never met again.

They scrap like psychotic children, and the professor is most fortunate that the reunion is temporary.

The only person who appears to have any understanding of or fondness for the older man, is his youngest daughter, who plans vaguely to keep house while her mother, brother and sisters go their own ways. This youngster comforts her father by asking him to read from his own writings, and promptly falls asleep.

The combination of a tritely academic script and what seems like no direction at all, makes a pretty dull evening.

Boris Karloff, who is starred, is hard put to it to bring more than gloomy dignity to the role of the professor. Neither his profession nor his family puts him in a position of winning much sympathy or interest.

One sharp ray of brightness pierces the evening, in the performance of Una O'Connor as a cracked cook and bottle washer. It is a character sketch brilliantly composed of lightning glances and gestures, and superb readings. At the end of the evening, she is the one character you know and would like to meet again.

Daily Mirror

March 3, 1948

'The Linden Tree' Is A Boring Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Actor-Manager Maurice Evans brought Boris Karloff back to Broadway last evening in J. B. Priestley's "The Linden Tree." In the new arrival at the Music Box Theatre, Karloff, who has been specializing in film monsters, impersonates a gentle, civilized college professor.

Professor Linden is celebrating his 65th birthday in his grim house in Burmanley, northern England, when the curtain rises. Visiting him are a daughter, who married a French Catholic and adopted that religion; another daughter who became a doctor and a Communist, and a son who became a super-spiv, or get-rich-quick-easy boy.

With him are his wife, who wants him to retire and enjoy some of the few remaining comforts of life, and a daughter, one step removed from happy childhood and just discovering the secrets of classical music. The new head of the college, who wants to put education on a mass production basis, finally forces the professor out, and the kindly scholar turns to the writing of a volume on history for consolation.

Other characters in the play are two grubby students, a cynical college executive and a blowsy, boozy, garrulous housemaid.

The above all seemed to us more types than people. They talked interminably and did precious little. They spouted platitudes about the conflict between faith and science, the merits of the easy and hard ways of life, the menace of the atom bomb to civilization, methods of education, austerity, etc.

Everything that Priestley has to say has been said better by someone else. He throws no new light on the many subjects which he considered briefly. He never really comes conclusively to grips with anything. He starts a lot of things and finishes none of them.

"The Linden Tree," as a result, proved, for us at least, a pretentious, windy bore. It rehashes matters that have been treated more interestingly and intelligently in numerous essays and books. It sets us on no new paths of thought. It illuminated none of the ideas it trots out hurriedly. It is lugubrious theatre.

Karloff gives an earnest performance as Professor Linden. He wrings all the emotion possible out of Priestley's surface chatter. He speaks clearly and loudly enough for those out front to understand him. Which is more than most of the cast do. Some of them seemed to think they were in a private feud, and to heck with the public out front.

PM Exclusive

March 4, 1948

Kronenberger

Anything But Good, Anything But Gay

J. B. Priestley's *The Linden Tree* is a big success in England — for the particular reason, I should think, that England is its theme. That's a quite understandable, even a quite unassailable reason; but one could think, all the same, of sounder ones. The play, for instance, might be successful in England because it's very interesting or dramatic or alive; in which event it could hardly fail to be successful over here. Unhappily, however, it's not very interesting, and not the least bit dramatic or alive. As with most Priestley plays, it has certain virtues. As with too many Priestley plays, the virtues are completely flattened out by the faults.

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Actually the virtues belong more to the playwright than to the play; and more, for that matter, to the man himself than to the playwright. Here, as in the past, Mr. Priestley is a social-minded and at times eloquent man, but above all a thoughtful one. And what he is thoughtful about is the present state and the eventual fate of England. Using an elderly professor and the members of his family as symbols, he has made a lucid diagram, however languid a drama. Worn down by a lifetime in a dull, provincial university town, the professor's wife wants to get out, to escape, at any cost. One of the professor's daughters has married a French Catholic and come to pin all her hopes on religion; his other daughter has become a doctor and tries to put all her faith in science. His son has been stripped of any kind of faith by the war, and becomes a frankly cynical money-grubber. Only a daughter who is too young to have lived takes any real joy in life.

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As for the Professor himself, he has reached 65, the age of retirement. His family want him to retire; the new-fangled University authorities wish him to. But he is for going on—as he would have every one else go on—with his job. In an England full of isms and antagonisms, of doctrinaire attitudes and fumbled activities, an England without much real hope in its heart, he is for simple, untheoretical courage and perseverance. If things get bad, so may things get better: "Patience," he quotes from *Don Quixote*, "patience, and shuffle the cards." But though Mr. Priestley may see this as England's best hope, he doesn't seem too hopeful that England will. For his professor, however much loved and respected, winds up everywhere unheeded, and finally unheard.

Despite the professor's affirmative philosophy, there is something peculiarly and pathetically cheerless about *The Linden Tree:* it is as though Mr. Priestley had been desperately raking the embers of English existence to find a last glowing coal. And surely, if most of the other people's programs seem too rigid or too hopeless, the professor's seems too hazy—a mere attitude of mind rather than a line of action. Perhaps that's just what Mr. Priestley intended it to be. But unfortunately his entire play is attitudes of mind rather than lines of action; something that no more has real people in it than real plot; and that is as lacking in exciting verbal drama as in human. It neither crackles with sharp talk, nor burns with passionate feeling, nor flames up with prophetic vision; if occasionally eloquent, it is oftener just agreeably conversational, and oftener still just quietly dull. Or Mr. Priestley resorts—fairly successfully but quite shamelessly—to the eccentric-family-servant kind of thing for liveliness and humor.

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Completely changing his spots as an actor, Boris Karloff makes the professor unusually likeable — so likeable that he can be forgiven for making him rather monotonous as well. There are pleasant performances by Viola Keats and Barbara Everest; and Una O'Connor coaxes a good many laughs out of the eccentric-servant part. And there's a good set by Peter Wolf.

—Louis Kronenberger

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

March 3, 1948

By HOWARD BARNES

Some Bare Branches

J. B. PRIESTLEY considers a number of themes with more words than meaning in "The Linden Tree." His new play at the Music Box touches on anthropology and music, the warfare of science and religion, the various problems of an aging professor's family and the present English experiment in non-violent revolution. It is well served in a handsome Maurice Evans production and occasional scenes of prepossessing acting on the part of Boris Karloff, Una O'Connor and the others in the company. What the author needed was rigid editing. His discursive ramblings on the contemporary scene have neither dramatic discipline nor impact. Before it is over "The Linden Tree" becomes exceedingly tiresome.

* * *

The Priestley gift for gab was never more apparent than it is in this British importation. Employing a history professor's study in the provincial town of Burmanley in Northern England as the center of his action, he goes on at a great rate for four scenes, as he shows the pedagogue refusing to be forced out of teaching by either his family or his superiors. The varied reactions of the old boy's intimates to his predicament give the author a chance to voice a variety of opinions on the way of the world. Since most of them are phrased in lines which have become too familiar for comfort, they do not keep the slight plot dynamically exciting. Moreover, Priestley merely forgets most of his cast in the climax, to leave the work inconclusively annoying.

Karloff, making a complete switch from sinister roles to that of a genial and understanding educator, gives a fine account of himself as the elder Linden. By the sheer sincerity of his performance he bolsters up one interlude after another which fall into no perceptible pattern. He works hard in a drama which he dominates for much of three hours. He rarely falters. Unfortunately, his scenes with Barbara Everest as the wife who forsakes him in the real crisis of his life, have no more than evanescent emotional power. A lot of loose ends are left straggling in "The Linden Tree." It is not Karloff's fault. Miss Everest does her best to personify the revolt of a tired professor's wife, who welcomes an easy existence with her financially successful son, but it is not enough to fuse the human burden of the production.

* * *

Miss O'Connor has so little to do in the proceedings that her portrayal is altogether a tour-de-force. As the housekeeper who stands by her embattled master, she even makes the business of smoking a cigarette a delightful passage in a show which says little of import and goes nowhere structurally. Halliwell Hobbes jr. is properly cynical as the Linden son. Viola Keats, Cathleen Cordell and Marilyn Erskine play the daughters with curiously uneven emphasis. The trouble with "The Linden Tree" is that there is no real emphasis in the writing. George Schaefer has tried to pull it into a plausible continuity in his direction, but Priestly should have taken care of that matter before the work ever reached rehearsal.

The New York Times

March 3, 1948

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

For a progressive man, J. B. Priestley can write astonishingly old-fashioned dramas. Like most of his plays, "The Linden Tree," put on at the Music Box last evening, proceeds from admirable premises. Mr. Priestley is declaring himself in favor of the people who accept responsibility and keep faith with a troubled world. He is naturally writing for audiences in England, where the gray is grimier than it is here. In fact, Mr. Priestley is preaching to them. Since "The Linden Tree" is much cherished in London at the moment, English audiences obviously like it, as they like most of Mr. Priestley's plays.

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But there ought to be a sprightlier way to cheer people up and strengthen their moral courage. At heart, "The Linden Tree" is a conversation piece. Professor Linden, sixty-five years of age, and a history professor, speaks for wisdom and probity. His wife speaks for weariness. His son speaks for cynicism and despair. One daughter speaks for the peace of retreat into religion. Another daughter, who is a scientist, has no concrete program, although she discusses one. The only member of the Linden family who shares her father's native faith is the youngest daughter, who is a musician. As one of Mr. Priestley's spokesmen declares, the young and the old were always the best. The cheap stuff lies in the middle.

To people who need particular counsel at the moment, this generous throwing about of brains may be tartly pertinent and exciting. But to this playgoer, "The Linden Tree" is crowded with the tired ghosts of Pinero, Henry Arthur Jones and Galsworthy, who also used to go on at length about moral matters. Even Bernard Shaw, who is a brilliant prose stylist, would hesitate before stuffing an evening with so many different lines of argument.

Mr. Priestley is a solid citizen of the world, but his prose style is solemn and his set speeches of wisdom sound like sanctimonious phrase-making. One of the oddest things about Mr. Priestley's plays is that they mirror his mind so dimly. He is a vigorous, sharp, courageous and stimulating man of letters. But "The Linden Tree," like most of his plays, looks as though it were written with the left hand between more important engagements.

Give it credit for one achievement. It proves that Boris Karloff, made up to look like a human being, is an extraordinarily winning actor. He plays the venerable academician with attractive, humorsome conviction. Shaggy, tweedy, gray-haired, he has warmth and magnetism; and those beetling brows, which can scare you in his shiver-plays, can soothe you with wisdom when he is in a benevolent mood.

Marilyn Erskine, a honey-blonde, plays the part of the good sprite among the Learian daughters with liveliness and enchantment. Una O'Connor plays a comic servant with a biting impertinence that delighted the audience, who would laugh at anything, including lunatics. But it is to be feared that none of the other actors is able to rise above the lugubrious level of Mr. Priestley's series of arguments. George Schaefer's direction is literal and Peter Wolf's setting is a plodding affair.

Although Mr. Priestley earnestly argues for faith in "The Linden Tree," he does it with words. Spirit is the seed of faith. But there is very little spirit in this dull play.

Journal American

March 3, 1948

A Static, Confused Play by Priestley

By ROBERT GARLAND

If J. B. Priestley writes a novel in dialogue and Maurice Evans produces it as a play, there's nothing I can do about it. There's nothing anybody can do about "The Linden Tree," which has taken over the Music Box, after reporting that its intentions are good, their fulfilment bad.

A novelist who takes his time, Mr. Priestley belongs to the Try-Try-Again school of playwriting. Scarcely a season passes without one of his novels-in-dialogue reaching a Broadway stage. So far this season there've been two. "An Inspector Calls" and last night's "Linden Tree."

Preceeding these were "When We Are Married," "I Have Been Here Before," "Time and the Conways," "Laburnum Grove," "Eden End," "Dangerous Corner," "The Good Companions" and, no doubt, a couple more whose names escape my memory for the moment. Mr. Priestley is nothing if not prolific!

And replete with high ideas. In "The Linden Tree" there is enough peace and goodwill to stop war and rumors of war forever. The trouble is, they lack conviction. And force! And effective distribution! They're merely the tired old words of a tired old man in a tired old country . . .

The English words of an Englishman in England!

* * *

Essay on Failure

Actually, "The Linden Tree" isn't even a novel in dialogue. It's more of an essay in distress than anything. An essay on the failure of civilization — "Bongo! Bongo! Bongo!" as it were—in general and civilization in England in particular. Professor Linden would never leave the Congo!

But Professor Linden remains in England. At the spry age of 65, he chooses to continue his duties at the university in the provincial city of Burmanley, where God and Mr. Priestley have seen fit to place him. Nobody can pursuade him to pack his bag and go away to London.

Such story as "The Linden Tree" provides tells how Mrs. Linden and all her offspring move heaven and earth to get Professor Linden to go to town. All save Dinah! Old age and young youth being the ones to understand, she and the professor are paired openly against the others.

And that's the whole story at the Music Box, although the Black Market threatens to raise its attractive head and accuse Rex Linden, Professor Linden's oldest son, of dubious dealings. But the